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Unresolved Tensions: William Faulkner's *The Unvanquished* as a Short-Story Cycle

Author Irene Visser

Abstract

This essay argues for a wider recognition of *The Unvanquished* as a short-story cycle and for a new appreciation of its generic features of simultaneous fragmentation and unity. For much of its critical history *The Unvanquished* was misinterpreted as a short story miscellany or as a bildungsroman. Reading it as a short-story cycle allows an acknowledgment of its inherent tensions and discontinuities without urging a resolution that would elide or eclipse them, as has frequently been critical practice. Presenting first an overview of the conflicted critical history of *The Unvanquished*, and demonstrating Faulkner's deliberate use of hybrid forms, the essay then focuses on the distinguishing features of three stories to explore the tensions between their disparate plot movements and the volume's underlying unity. The essay's central argument is that it is due to its hybrid formality that *The Unvanquished* presents a unique contribution to Faulkner's oeuvre of the 1930s.

Keywords: Faulkner; *The Unvanquished*; short-story cycle; critical history

Often regarded as one of William Faulkner's least notable works, *The Unvanquished* (1938) has received relatively little attention in the huge repository of Faulkner studies. Critical and academic opinions have favoured Faulkner's more complex 1930s fiction, and the quantity and quality of this book's reception does not compare with the reception of *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *Light in August* (1932) or *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). Much of the early critical interest in *The Unvanquished* focused on the book's genre. While early reviewers were favourably impressed by what they deemed was a collection of interlinked stories, most literary critics since the mid-twentieth century have regarded the book as a novel. The question of the book's genre may appear to be merely one of description or categorization, but it is however an important one. Genre guides critical and readerly expectations and is instrumental in determining our

appreciation and evaluation of literary works. For instance, the view that *The Unvanquished* is to be considered a collection of stories with little internal coherence would undercut the notion that its overall thematic complexity is worthy of serious critical attention. Similarly, reading the book as a novel would eclipse the brilliant diversity of the book's disparate plotlines. Both readings would fail to adequately evaluate *The Unvanquished*'s place in the development of Faulkner's artistic oeuvre and would deny the book a place of note in what is arguably the most important decade in Faulkner's artistic career. This essay argues for a wider recognition of *The Unvanquished* as a short-story cycle and a new appreciation of the features that effect a tension between its simultaneous fragmentation and unity, a tension that is inherent to the genre. This enables a re-evaluation of *The Unvanquished* as a generically hybrid book whose thematic diversity and narrative intricacy makes it fully deserving of its position among Faulkner's works of the 1930s.

The genre of the short-story cycle has roots that go back to ancient times in which individually composed stories were gathered together to form cycles or sequences that were orally transmitted. *The Odyssey* and *Iliad*, the *Panchatantra*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are such cycles, and many more cycles of stories, poems, plays and novels have been popular throughout the world, and in all periods of literary history. In contrast to this long history of the genre, the history of its literary theorization is a very short one. The systematic description of the genre began in the 1970s with the first authoritative publications by Forrest L. Ingram (1971) and Joanne V. Creighton (1977). Susan Garland Mann published the first systematic history of the short-story cycle in 1989. Since the 1990s a growing body of critical and theoretical explorations of the genre has emerged, with varying suggestions for the correct nomenclature including short-story composite, fragmented novel, story compound, short-story sequence, hybrid, blend and so on. It is now accepted practice to use the term short-story cycle. Cycle is indeed a felicitous term because it expresses recursiveness and repetition, and not merely sequentiality, as the specific characteristics that distinguish the short-story cycle from the novel, the novella and the short-story miscellany. Briefly defined as "an open work consisting of closed stories,"¹ a short-story cycle's main features are the

¹ Lundén, *United Stories of America*, 11.

simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence of its constituent parts. This “fragmentary recursiveness” and “formal hybridity,” Smith notes, enables a specific mode of representing subjectivity that has too often gone unnoticed or undervalued, as part of the “pervasive, longstanding mitigation of the genre.”² This lack of recognition marks the genre’s history. As James Nagel writes, the short-story cycle has “gone largely unrecognized as a genre” even though it is “one of the most important forms of fiction in twentieth-century American literature” ; moreover, as he claims, “it is an area of intellectual inquiry that has only just begun.”³

The neglect or lack of awareness of specific generic features also characterizes the critical history of Faulkner’s *Unvanquished*. While already in 1977 Creighton argued persuasively that it is a short-story cycle, notions of the book as a collection of linked stories or, more frequently, as a novel have continued to surface in Faulkner criticism until the present day. Hans Skei, a prominent scholar in the area of Faulkner’s short stories, states in his monograph *Reading Faulkner’s Best Short Stories* (1999) that *The Unvanquished* “is certainly not a mere collection of short stories,” but Faulkner’s successful creation of “a unified and serious novel.”⁴ In a more recent publication of 2007 Skei expresses a somewhat different view, observing rather ambivalently that “critical consensus seems to be that the book undoubtedly is a novel, but its genesis indicates that if any of Faulkner’s books should benefit from an understanding of it as a cycle of stories it would be *The Unvanquished*.”⁵ While this comment reflects the general growing awareness of the short-story cycle as a distinct genre, critical articles on *The Unvanquished* have continued to regard it as a novel, and its stories as chapters (cf. Jabbur, Hannon, Newhouse, Rio-Jeliffe, Railey, Sharpe).

This continuing misclassification may be understood as the legacy of twentieth-century Faulkner criticism, in which the book was regarded as a novel. When asked about its genre, Faulkner himself denied that he had intended the stories to coalesce into a novel: “I saw them as a long series. I had never thought of it in terms of a novel,

² “Short-Story Cycle,” 211.

³ *Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, 9, 258.

⁴ *Faulkner’s Best Short Stories*, 19.

⁵ “Faulkner’s Short Stories,” 403.

exactly. I realized they would be too episodic to be what I considered a novel, so I thought of them as a series of stories....”⁶ This was also the predominant notion at the time of its reception. Reviewers and readers did not regard it as a novel but as a collection of interrelated short stories and appreciated the book for its storytelling. Kate Boyle, in *The New Republic*, felt that the stories had a “fabulous, wondrous, fluxing power,”⁷ and the Canadian poet Earle Birney saw Faulkner emerging in *The Unvanquished* as a “less publicized but more authentic” author, and “a sharp and brilliant narrator of short stories.”⁸

It is well-documented that *The Unvanquished* was first conceived in the early 1930s as a sequence of stories about two boys, initially about twelve years old, set in the period 1862-1873, in the last years of the Civil War and going into the Reconstruction era. Faulkner had hoped to publish the six stories as a sequence in *The Saturday Evening Post*, but the *Post*, while accepting the first five, rejected the last story, “Drusilla,” (retitled “Skirmish at Sartoris”), which was subsequently accepted by *Scribner’s* and published in 1935. Evidently the unity of the series was not strong enough to convince the *Post* to accept the last story. Nearly two years later, after *Absalom, Absalom!* had received a mixed reception, Faulkner revised the six linked stories and added a final story to improve the book’s overall narrative cohesion. This kind of revision often lies at the basis of short-story cycles, most of which are composed by an author only after all of the stories have been written, in a conscious process of revision and unification.⁹

The revisionary work on *The Unvanquished* may be understood in this context of Faulkner’s continuous reworking of his short and longer fiction, combining material and experimenting with generic fusions and crossovers. For example, his story “This Kind of Courage,” written in 1934 but unpublished, was expanded to become the novel *Pylon* (1935); and “Barn Burning,” which appears today in many anthologies as one of Faulkner’s best-known stories, was first written as a self-contained short story and then

⁶ Quoted in Millgate, *Achievement*, 167.

⁷ Quoted in Blotner, *Biography*, 986.

⁸ Quoted in Parini, *Matchless Time*, 222.

⁹ Mann, *Short Story Cycle*, 16.

revised to become the opening chapter of *The Hamlet* (1940). *The Unvanquished*, published in February 1938, and the later *Go Down Moses* (1942) were both the result of a careful restructuring process. Creighton, after closely exploring Faulkner's process of revision and composition in *Go Down, Moses*, concludes that she is convinced that "he was attempting to create a new synthetic form, the short story composite, in which the stories are autonomous units governed by their own principles while they are at the same time integral parts of a larger whole.... Those critics who have proclaimed its 'novelistic' unity have underestimated the unusual development of *Go Down, Moses*."¹⁰

The revision process of *The Unvanquished* likewise provides grounds for the conclusion that Faulkner wanted simultaneously to create unity in the sequence and also to keep intact the autonomy of the individual stories. While after their revision, the stories became more unified through a more extensive use of the theme of race and a stronger presence of narrative voice of the mature Bayard Sartoris, the further additions of background narratives about John Sartoris and the McCaslin brothers in fact augmented the autonomy of the individual stories. It is remarkable that while the initial reception of *The Unvanquished* was very positive, and far more favourable than that of *Absalom, Absalom!*, the negative responses at the time were directed mainly at Faulkner's revisions, particularly the expanded background sections on the McCaslins and John Sartoris. Kate Boyle, for example, criticized the additions for being "full-length portraits which abruptly become caricatures ... in the shameless voice of the evangelist declaiming in solemn, flowery passages."¹¹ The critique of the added material indicates that the separate stories did not benefit from the revisions much and underscores the notion that the original stories in the cycle were complete and effective as autonomous narratives. Moreover, the added material in *The Unvanquished* is relatively insubstantial, and, as critics have remarked, does not greatly improve the book's overall coherence. Michael Millgate comments that if Faulkner attempted to develop the thematic links between the stories to make a more cohesive structure, this attempt "cannot be said to be very thoroughly pursued."¹² This lack of coherence has

¹⁰ *Craft of Revision*, 86.

¹¹ Quoted in Blotner, *Biography*, 986.

¹² *Achievement*, 166.

often been perceived as Faulkner's failure to unify the sequence, a negative appraisal that is intrinsic to the critical history of the short-story cycle, and which derives from a misinterpretation of the genre's characteristic dualism of unity and fragmentation.¹³ Even today, when we are experiencing an upsurge in the genre, and despite the Pulitzer Prize awarded to Jennifer Egan's *A Visit to The Goon Squad* (2010), negative appraisals of short-story cycles display this lack of recognition of the genre's characteristic deliberate disjointedness. Fragmentariness is generally seen as a weakness. Ellen D'hoker recounts that the short-story cycle *The Lucky Ones* (2003) by Rachel Cusk, erroneously published with the subtitle "A Novel," received angry and perplexed critiques on its publication due to book's disjunctive structure. (The publisher dropped the subtitle in subsequent editions.)¹⁴

If critics writing in the twentieth century failed to appreciate *The Unvanquished*'s disjunction which was kept intact in the revision process, they also failed to note its generic commonalities with the short-story cycles of Faulkner's contemporaries such as Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914), Hemingway's *In Our Time* (1925) and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919). On the success of his book, Anderson claimed to have invented its 'looseness' as a new form to fit twentieth-century American literature, proudly stating in his *Memoirs*, "I invented it. It was mine."¹⁵ Unable or unwilling to acknowledge this new 'looseness' of form as a significant development in American literature, Faulkner's critics in the mid-twentieth century sought to categorize *The Unvanquished* as a traditional form. In the 1950s and 1960s influential critics such as Cleanth Brooks, Hyatt H. Waggoner, Carvel Collins and James B. Meriwether argued in favour of its categorization as a novel, thus establishing the dominant view for much of its critical history. This outcome accords with what theorists of the short story see as the long-standing tendency to privilege the novel over the short-story cycle. In an article published as recently as 2016, Smith observes that "the aggrandizement of the novel has marginalized one of the most significant developments in US literature: the emergence and proliferation of the short-

¹³ Nagel, *Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, 56; Mann, *Short Story Cycle*, ix.

¹⁴ D'hoker, "Linked Stories."

¹⁵ Quoted in Smith, "Teaching the Short-Story Cycle," 210.

story cycle.”¹⁶ It is arguably due to this tendency to prioritize the novel that Faulkner’s contribution to this development of the American short-story cycle in *The Unvanquished* has gone largely unnoticed.

The unique relationship between the individual, self-sufficient stories and the unity and coherence of the cycle as a whole has been defined by various theorists as a tension; the tension between “the one and the many,”¹⁷ or, more specifically, the “tension between simultaneous separateness and cohesion.”¹⁸ In the genre’s spectrum of cycles the degree of this tension between fragmentation and coherence determines how close a book is to the miscellaneous collection or the traditional novel.¹⁹ *The Unvanquished* is at the end of the spectrum that features the more obviously or explicitly unified cycles while *Go Down, Moses* is at the other end of the spectrum where we find the more implicitly unified cycles that can easily be taken for short story collections, such as Joyce’s *Dubliners*.²⁰ Despite the closeness of *Go Down, Moses* to the story miscellany we have evidence that Faulkner opposed that classification, for when Random House published it as *Go Down, Moses and Other Stories* Faulkner insisted that ‘*and Other Stories*’ be deleted permanently in its subsequent editions. This may have led Skei state that “it is a commonplace that *Go Down* is a novel,”²¹ a statement which demonstrates the general lack of acknowledgment of the short-story cycle as a hybrid genre.

If characters recur in a collection of short stories, readers and critics tend to respond to it as a novel. Character repetition in *The Unvanquished* was evidently a determinant in its generic classification by Faulkner scholars who established its genre as a coming-of-age novel or bildungsroman. Joseph Blotner, Faulkner’s first (and still

¹⁶ “Short-Story Cycle,” 208.

¹⁷ Ingram, *Representative Short Story Cycles*, 19.

¹⁸ Lundén, *United Stories of America*, 33.

¹⁹ Luscher, *Short Story Sequence*, 163.

²⁰ Mann, *Short Story Cycle*, xi, 15.

²¹ *Faulkner’s Best Short Stories*, 19.

foremost) biographer designated it as a “kind of double Bildungsroman,”²² thus lending authoritative support to the general idea at the time that the separate stories are chapters in a carelessly constructed novel rather than as a cycle of linked, yet autonomous stories. The assumption that the book is a novel of the bildungsroman genre, and thus has one plot, frequently engendered the critique that its chapters do not provide the narrative cohesion that leads up to the final chapter where the protagonist has reached maturity. A case in point is an article on *The Unvanquished* by Warren Akin IV. Assuming that the book is a bildungsroman like Dickens’s *Great Expectations* and Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, Akin finds *The Unvanquished* vastly inferior to these classics of the genre because its plot has too many distractions and “much irrelevant material.”²³ The book is a failure due to its lack of a consistent plot movement; “the chapters don’t function as chapters should, preparing us for the book’s ending.”²⁴ As a short-story cycle, *The Unvanquished* has no single plot and in fact does not need to have it; however, Akin’s view has long been the common critical view. There are many similar cases of short-story cycles being deemed a failure by critics unaware of the genre. Nagel, in signaling this in his overview of the cycle in American literature, emphasizes that we should acknowledge that “temporal leaps, thematic discontinuities, and structural shifts . . . are normative in the traditional story cycle and not artistic weakness at all.”²⁵

While *The Unvanquished* is not a novel, it is very clearly patterned on the structure of a bildungsroman. This pattern is common in the short-story cycle genre, the form of the cycle being “especially well- suited to describe the maturation process, since it allows the writer to focus on only those people and incidents that are essential to character development.”²⁶ The term *bildungs-cycle* is now generally used for cycles that have their protagonists’ maturation as their structuring device. Next to Bayard Sartoris, examples of such protagonists are George Willard in Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*,

²² *Biography*, 965.

²³ “Blood,” 10.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁵ *Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, 56-7.

²⁶ Mann, *Short Story Cycle*, 9.

Hemingway's Nick Adams in *In Our Time*, and Ike McCaslin in *Go Down, Moses*. As Michelle Pacht observes, "the short story cycle expresses both the plight of an individual and the fate of a community through its very structure."²⁷ The fractured structure of a bildungsroman-cycle enables not only the presentation of decisive moments in a character's development, but also evokes a sense of discontinuity, a reversal of the notion of a stable identity, and the denial of a nurturing community as the reassuring, unified setting to the protagonist's coming of age. Reading *The Unvanquished* as a short-story cycle allows a recognition of these cultural tensions and discontinuities, without urging a resolution that would elide or eclipse them. For instance, in "Ambuscade" the northerner Colonel Dick acts with honour and courtesy, granting Rosa Millard and Bayard and Ringo safety and protection despite the boys' earlier attempt to shoot his soldiers. This short story pivots on the reversal of cultural stereotypes; Colonel Dick's Southern-style courtesy and chivalry unsettles the boys' internalized normative categories of northern barbarism and southern refinement, in which gallant fighting and superior manners were deemed specifically Southern attributes. The story "Vendée" further undermines this ideology in presenting the book's worst criminal, Grumby, as a Southerner who is capable of robbing and killing his own countrymen and who murders the old lady who found protection from the Yankee Colonel Dick. The developing deep structure of *The Unvanquished* is the subversion of the notion of the South that, as Joel Williamson states, poses the "stability and social cohesion of the South" as an essentially aristocratic and refined society.²⁸

Since for much of the twentieth century, and even today, critical consensus has been that *The Unvanquished* is a novel presenting the narrative of Bayard Sartoris' development from childhood to maturity, the general tendency has been to ignore the specific nature of each story's separate narrative structure and tonality. Assuming *a priori* the book's ultimate cohesion, critics have regarded each story primarily as a building block in the overall thematic edifice, all sequentially contributing to story of Bayard Sartoris' coming-of-age. As a consequence, the last story, "An Odour of Verbena," has come in for the greater part of critical attention, as the chapter which brings together the thematic strains of the preceding stories and which allows critics to

²⁷ *Subversive Storyteller*, 1.

²⁸ *Crucible of Race*, 7.

construct an overarching coherence that however erases the contrasts among the individual stories, which originally were not written to lead up to “Odour.” In the critical history of the *bildungs-cycle* this focus on the final story has been common practice which, as Mann states, reduces the cycle’s specific duality and obscures its characteristic themes of isolation, indeterminacy and disintegration.²⁹ In *The Unvanquished*, the significance of this duality is evident from its inherent tensions between disparate endings of individual stories and the underlying connected themes of cultural disintegration and individual moral maturation. These tensions do not find closure in the final chapter but remain unresolved, indicative of the ultimate impossibility of coherent narratives of the Civil War and Reconstruction periods. John T. Matthews makes a similar observation about the short-story cycle *Go Down, Moses*, stating that “the degree of narrative fragmentation, the extent of the falling away of novelistic wholeness, is itself a dramatization of the fracturing power of time. Faulkner’s view of history includes the momentum toward disintegration.”³⁰ That momentum, inscribed in the fragmentary structure, is also a driving force in *The Unvanquished*, its disunity of separate stories causing the effect of dislocation, of estrangement and cultural fragmentation.

While there are many unifying elements in the volume, such as its cast of characters, its setting, and its themes of Southern cultural codes and social mores, the most evidently differentiating components of the book are its plots, which are as diverse as comedy and tragedy. The jarring effect of placing differently emplotted stories in sequence, often regarded by critics as a failure, is however characteristic of the well-crafted short-story cycle. Plot activates our readerly sense of causality and arouses anticipations that structure our reading, in particular influencing our anticipations—and appreciation—of narrative endings. In *The Unvanquished* this interplay of causality and appreciation is activated by a diversity of plot patterns, most of which have the reassuring endings of traditional tales. The contrasts between these endings and the cycle’s recurring unsettling motifs of war and betrayal evoke the tensions that are characteristic of the genre and which are also specific to Faulkner’s fiction of the 1930s. I will bring these tensions to the fore by presenting readings of three stories from the

²⁹ *Short Story Cycle*, 14.

³⁰ Quoted in Mann, *Short Story Cycle*, 12.

perspective of plot: “Skirmish at Sartoris,” the story that has often been regarded as a failure, and which has a comedic structuring pattern; “Riposte in Tertio,” which is patterned on tragedy, thus involving a completely different reading experience; and “Retreat,” which has yet another distinct plot movement, that of the Quest. While the other stories also display different plot patterns I have selected these three stories because they are structured on what is known in narratology as masterplots. H. Porter Abbott defines masterplots as the underlying structures and their potential for readerly involvement of “stories that we tell over and over in myriad forms and that connect vitally with our deepest values, wishes and fears ... often influencing us without our wholly realising it.”³¹ The masterplots of *Tragedy* and *Comedy* have been theorised on the foundation first laid by Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and *Quest* has become a well-known plot pattern since Joseph Campbell’s 1949 landmark study of myth, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. In *The Unvanquished* Faulkner made use of *Tragedy*, *Comedy*, and *Quest*, the widely used, deep-seated plot patterns that “would appear to be universal.”³²

The story “Skirmish at Sartoris” has often been deemed deficient since it has little to do with what critics generally consider to be the book’s one plot, the maturation of Bayard Sartoris. Indeed “Skirmish” contributes little to that plot. Developing from a general situation of conflict and chaos to a final resolution, the story is based on the masterplot of *Comedy*. Offering entertainment rather than profundity, *Comedy* typically ends in light-hearted scenes of reconciliation and restoration of order, often involving a marriage or another form of union between the central characters of the narrative who were previously divided by parents or circumstances. To this masterplot belongs the type of an “unrelenting parent,” a character who complicates matters considerably, and a plot movement from protagonists’ inner confusion and ignorance to insight and awareness.

In “Skirmish” the comedic situation of conflict and confusion is initiated and fuelled by the indomitable ladies of the town, who are convinced that Drusilla Hawk has been living in sin with John Sartoris and is now pregnant. On hearing this falsehood, Drusilla is too shocked to deny the charges and runs away in confusion to hide from the pressures of the social gaze. Chaos and misunderstanding increase with the arrival of

³¹ *Narrative*, 42, 43.

³² *Ibid.*, 43.

two notherners who come to help elect the first black marshall of Jefferson. When Drusilla comes to her senses (following the plot's movement from ignorance to insight) and accepts the marriage with John Sartoris that Miss Louisa, the story's "unrelenting parent figure," has arranged, the plot's movement toward resolution begins. John Sartoris agrees to the marriage and ends the political complications by killing the carpetbaggers. When the marriage takes place at the end of the story, the old order is fully restored, and the story concludes on a triumphant celebratory tone with men of the old regiment shouting the rebel yell; "'Yaaaaay, Drusilla!' they hollered. 'Yaaaaay, John Sartoris! Yaaaaay!'"³³ To read "Skirmish" from this perspective is to realise that it follows exactly the *Comedy* masterplot, arousing and fulfilling readerly expectations, and thus enables the pleasure of a consistently developed comedic plot. Critics have however generally not appreciated the comedic ending to this story. Akin, reading the story as a chapter in a novel, complains that it is defective since "our primary feeling at the end of the chapter is pleasure, but one expects more and *the plot calls for more* than this somewhat humourous story."³⁴ Like Akin, Blotner dismisses this narrative as a "happy-ending story" that is out of character for Faulkner, and even suggests that the author "may have gagged as he wrote the last lines."³⁵ The plot however precisely calls for this light and uncomplicated tonality since *Comedy* is by definition conservative and ultimately on the side of the establishment.

The fate of "Skirmish" has been to be disregarded or criticized as being incongruent with the other stories of the book, none of which have the *Comedy* masterplot. In the theory of the short-story cycle, such an anomalous story is called a 'fringe story' or 'satellite story' to distinguish it from the core stories in the cycle. The function of such a fringe story is quite important to the book as a whole because it augments the cycle's characteristic disjunction, emphasizing fragmentation instead of unity and leaving a sense of unease in its wake. "Skirmish" performs that function, as does, for instance, "Pantaloons in Black" in *Go Down, Moses*. In her discussion of "Pantaloons in Black" Sandra Lee Kleppe states that it was generally considered "an

³³ *Unvanquished*, 262.

³⁴ "Blood," 9, italics mine.

³⁵ *Biography*, 860.

inappropriate anomaly” since it was incongruent with the rest of the book, but that judging from Faulkner’s meticulous revision process its marginal integration as a fringe story was deliberate.³⁶ Acknowledging this function of “Skirmish” in the sequence of *The Unvanquished* enables us to re-evaluate its contribution to the overall sequence and to refute its reputation of the book’s failed story. What it contributes is not only a lightening of the overall atmosphere of the sequence, but also a stronger sense of the tension that characterizes the cycle. In this story we have seen a double murder carried out pragmatically as a necessary act to be accomplished before a wedding can take place. In the later story “An Odour of Verbena” the murder is given an entirely different tonality when Bayard says “they were men. Human beings,” in response to Drusilla’s statement that “they were Northerners, foreigners who had no business here.”³⁷ Bayard’s words resonate with an earlier account of this violent incident in *Light in August* by Joanna Burden as the cruel murder of a one-armed man and his twelve-year old son. In the comedic story of “Skirmish” such a serious tonality would be out of place. Due to the end-consciousness of the disparate short stories, the tension evoked by the callous killing in one story and its reframing as a serious crime in another story is not resolved, and in fact is not to be resolved by discounting one story in favour of another. Both stories contribute to an uneasy sense of disjunctive ethics and the inconclusive continuity of deep-seated social codes.

The story “Retreat,” which has the *Quest* masterplot, further demonstrates the variety and disparity of plot structures in *The Unvanquished*. Like *Comedy* and *Tragedy*, *Quest* is a classic masterplot which appears in a “thousand faces” in stories throughout the world. Joseph Campbell describes the basic plot movement--from the perspective of the *Quest*’s hero--as follows:

The hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.³⁸

³⁶ “Short Story Composite,” 174-5.

³⁷ *Unvanquished*, 278.

³⁸ *Hero*, 30.

What defines this plot movement is the atmosphere of mystery and wonder and the supernatural events leading to the ultimately reassuring, beneficial ending of traditional storytelling. Infused by the sensations of Faulkner's own childhood, such as his boundless admiration for the Old Colonel (William Clark Falkner, his great-grandfather) whose wartime exploits made for gripping stories that Faulkner had heard and relished many times, "Retreat" evokes the atmosphere of traditional tales in which grave dangers and frightening, supernatural monsters are eventually overcome. Literary critics have generally noted this atmosphere with some reservations. Marius, for instance, calls the book as a whole a "romantic tall tale"³⁹ and other critics have deemed the Civil War episodes unrealistic or, in Kartiganer's words, "predictably far-fetched."⁴⁰ Genre is instrumental not only in guiding critical evaluations, but also in establishing atmosphere, the emotional "feel" of the story that influences reading and understanding. Read as interrelated but autonomous stories, the atmosphere of each story contributes a different tonality to the total effect of the cycle, which as a whole is neither romantic nor realistic, nor ultimately reassuring.

The *Quest* masterplot is evident in "Retreat" from its beginning. A dangerous journey away from "the world of common day" is undertaken when the Federal army is approaching. Granny Rosa Millard travels to Memphis with Bayard and Ringo to find a safe place for the family silver. Since Memphis is behind enemy lines the journey involves many dangerous encounters, which eventually force them to return home with the silver, which is then buried and almost immediately found by the enemy. This quest, then, ends in a failure, but already soon after the start of the journey it appears that the quest of this story is in fact not the safe deposit of silver, but the family's safety in a more profound and fundamental sense. The appearance of the *Quest* type of "the wise helper" in the character of Uncle Bud McCaslin heralds this development when he commands Bayard to follow in his father's footsteps and become, as John Sartoris' boy, renowned for bravery and fighting spirit. The quest is now reorientated towards

³⁹ *Reading Faulkner*, 38.

⁴⁰ "So I," 637.

Bayard's search for his father, the man he has not seen much of in the past years, but who, as he knows, is a hero of Southern resistance. When the boys are finally united with Colonel Sartoris and his rebel soldiers, Bayard, in a dreamlike state of exhaustion reminiscent of Campbell's "region of supernatural wonder," experiences all this as "in a dimension without time"; as magical events in the dark summer night, in which the Colonel is not so much a father figure as a figure of wonder, enigmatically poised between the godlike and the sinister, whose "teeth were showing and his eyes were bright as a cat's."⁴¹

In this mysterious episode there is no resolution to quest for the father. While, as Carolyn Porter states, the "concerned interrogation of fatherhood" is a central concern in Faulkner's work from *The Sound and the Fury* through *Light in August* to *Absalom, Absalom!*,⁴² "Retreat" moves away from such an interrogation and instead modulates to a different level using a transitional element in the form of the tall tale of Colonel Sartoris' trickster escape from the enemy. This story, told in oral style in Louvinia's voice has the characteristic open-endedness of the tall tale, its lack of closure contributing to the sense that the quest for the father must remain inconclusive. The *Quest* masterplot determines the story's ending, when closure is finally achieved after further mysterious and 'dreamlike' events. These involve Loosh's conviction that the Sartoris family are his oppressors, which is presented as a supernatural, evil spell that blinds him to reality; "he looked like he was asleep, like he didn't even see us."⁴³ As if bewitched, Loosh leads the Yankee soldiers to the buried silver, who take it and then set fire to the house. It now becomes clear from what narratologists term the 'architexture' of the story (the interplay of textual layers) that the central theme of the story is the quest for family unity. This quest is fully achieved in the final scene when Granny and the two boys are united, for the first time, in swearing at the enemy: "'The bastuds!' we cried. 'The bastuds! The bastuds!'"⁴⁴ Bayard and Ringo here find a profound connectedness with Granny, the family's maternal figure of authority, which had so far

⁴¹ *Unvanquished*, 80.

⁴² "Unmaking the Father," 170.

⁴³ *Unvanquished*, 89.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

been withheld by her strict moralism. The story's title "Retreat" accords with the *Quest* pattern: not only the South's retreat and Granny's retreat with the silver, but, at a deeper level, the retreat of the significance of the father-son theme to lead to the story's final theme of return and renewal; seemingly to a ruined house, but in fact to a renewal of life as a family.

The successful completion of this quest in this scene of close togetherness, despite the absent father, the burning house and stolen silver, makes for an ultimately reassuring ending, offering a sense of restored strength and confidence as the "boon" or "treasure" at the end of the *Quest*. However, its atmosphere of mysterious, fabulous or even demonic forces in which John Sartoris takes on legendary proportion as the infathomable hero-father, the wily trickster type, as well as the "demon-ogre" of folk literature,⁴⁵ clashes with the personage of Sartoris of the later stories who is a leader of men who is opposed and deposed by the same men; he is a murderer of two unarmed political adversaries and also a man weary of killing. Due to fragmentary structure of the short-story cycle, these tensions do not necessarily urge the reader to seek for a reconciliation or a resolution of such contradictory attributes, but they do contribute to the volume's underlying interrogation of Southern ideology.

The particular nature of the reading pleasure of a short-story cycle as "a unique hybrid," as Robert Luscher remarks, is twofold: it "combines two distinct reading pleasures: the patterned closure of individual stories and the discovery of larger unifying strategies that transcend the apparent gaps between stories."⁴⁶ In *The Unvanquished* Faulkner predicates that particular reading pleasure on his use of the masterplots of traditional tales and on the engagement with the volume's deeper structure of the changing individual and communal mores and codes in the South. This interplay, more than the surface story of Bayard's coming of age, provides the book's internal coherence and invites our readerly pleasure of discovery and synthesis of what Ingram terms the "pattern of recurrence and development" which a short-story sequence demands.⁴⁷ A third exploration of plot further demonstrates this.

⁴⁵ *Novels of William Faulkner*, 223.

⁴⁶ "Short Story Sequence," 150.

⁴⁷ *Representative Short Story Cycles*, 15.

The plot of “Riposte in Tertio,” first titled “The Unvanquished,” is based on the universally known masterplot of *Tragedy*, which involves a sequence of portentous actions which eventuate in the protagonist’s downfall. The movement is well-known: at the start of the story the protagonist is tempted into a shady or forbidden course of action which initially leads to positive results but ends disastrously. The plot entails *peripateia* or a fall from grace, and *harmatia*, commonly translated as the hero’s fatal flaw but more correctly to be regarded as a crucial mistake or error of judgment.

“Riposte” is the story of Miss Rosa Millard, Bayard’s upright and godfearing grandmother, who is tempted to engage in illegal act of commandeering mules from the Union army, using a forged document written on stolen Federal stationery. A staunch upholder of standards of propriety, Granny Millard is tempted to engage in fraud and forgery, carried out, moreover, in collaboration with the despicable Ab Snopes, who sells the mules back to the Federal quartermasters. The enterprise is very successful; 246 mules are handled to a profit of close to \$7,000, the money used to help the poor who have lost property in the war. Corrupted however by this success, Granny Millard becomes proud and self-righteous, informing God in her prayers that she has kept some of the money for her own family, adding “if I have sinned I am the best judge of that ... And if this be sin in Your sight, I take it on my conscience, too. Amen.”⁴⁸ This prayer bears the mark of *hubris*, the overweening pride that is the flaw of many a tragic hero, and from this point, indeed, *peripateia* is ensues when Granny Millard stubbornly refuses to heed the boys’ urgent warnings, as well as *harmatia*, her fatal “error of judgment,” when she assumes that Grumby will not hurt an old lady.

It is important to read this story on its own terms as an end-conscious, fully achieved narrative. If seen as a chapter in a bildungsroman it may be judged as a deficient, similar to “Skirmish,” and indeed critics who read it from this perspective have found the ending problematic. For instance, Blotner calls it curious and improbable that Miss Rosa Millard would be so foolish as to trust Grumby, concluding that Faulkner must have had a problem in writing it.⁴⁹ Read on its own terms, however, “Riposte” is complete, achieving the fully resolved ending of a tragic plot while

⁴⁸ *Unvanquished*, 181.

⁴⁹ *Biography*, 859.

adequately guiding readerly expectations to this end, and providing the particular reading pleasure inherent in *Tragedy*.

While *The Unvanquished* offers the classic pleasures of fully developed traditional plots its unity inheres in its representations and interrogations of the ‘myth of the South’, which, as Williamson observes, was by no means innocuous but “immanent and deadly serious.”⁵⁰ This lethal seriousness emerges most forcefully in the pressure that is exerted on Bayard to conform to the Southern tradition of retributive justice. Wyatt-Brown’s exploration of the antebellum social codes of white masculine honour, in his pivotal publication *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, makes it clear how extremely strong the peer pressure on young men like Bayard was, making them vulnerable to challenge, and creating unstable, conflicting identities. This instability is dramatized in *The Unvanquished* through the conflicting and contradictory motifs, plot lines and endings of the stories, as I have attempted to show. Bayard’s moral victory over the Southern vendetta code in “Odour” remains as integral to the overall unity of the cycle as his younger self’s triumphant revenge act of killing Grumby in “Vendée”; in a sense, both are victories over evil despite the very contradiction in their enactment. These contradictory enactments of justice contribute to the tensions that are characteristic of the cycle, tensions which are also evoked in scenes featuring John Sartoris and Granny Millard, as I have argued. As a character in various stories, Drusilla Hawks is similarly composed of contradictory features and actions. Her emancipated notions and reputation of having ‘unsexed’ herself, lady Macbeth-like, clash with her submissiveness and confusion in “Skirmish” as well as with her rigid and domineering adherence to tradition in “Odour,” when she pressures Bayard to avenge his father’s death. These various contradictions, due to the very different narrative arcs in the individual stories, contribute to the unresolved, remaining questions that the cycle raises, offering a sense of indeterminacy and instability of individuals within a changing cultural context, in line with what Olga Vickery deems a central theme in Faulkner’s ambition as a modernist writer, which is his questioning of the “human impulse for pattern and order.”⁵¹ As Matthews points out, the social order in the South of “what it means to be a planter, a gentleman, a lady, a poor white, a negro” was torn during the

⁵⁰ *Crucible*, 26.

⁵¹ *Novels of William Faulkner*, 221.

Civil War, the spectre haunting the subsequent “social convulsions” over the next century.⁵² *The Unvanquished*, like Faulkner’s other 1930s work, grapples with literary modes of expressing the disruption of the South’s social patterns and the Civil War’s legacy of traumatic memory in a new, unstable social order.

As my discussion has shown, the use of disparate plots and traditional storytelling techniques makes *The Unvanquished* different from Faulkner’s more experimental work of the 1930s, whereas its underlying concerns are very much consistent with it. Daniel Singal argues in *Faulkner: The Making of a Modernist* that as a southerner and a modernist, Faulkner’s artistic sensibilities were divided between two different world views. The tension between the values and sentiments of his upbringing and those he acquired through his extensive reading in modernism meant an abiding “conflict of cultures” that was never entirely resolved, and which was strongest in the 1930s.⁵³ The generic features of the short-story cycle are particularly suited to express these tensions. As Smith remarks, “if we most often understand modernism to be an impulse to understand, test, stabilize, and challenge the legitimacy of the word then the short-story cycle is an essential component of this critical narrative.”⁵⁴

Reading *The Unvanquished* as a short-story cycle allows the conclusion that Faulkner used the interrelatedness of disparate stories to address conflicting ideological notions and social codes of honour and valour, the powerful legacy of his upbringing and the central preoccupation at this time of his literary career. Charles Hannon, in his discussion of *The Unvanquished* as a record of Faulkner’s era, sees vacillations in the stories as evidence of Faulkner’s deliberate stance towards a lack of harmony, in order to refuse the coherence that would suggest a fond remembrance of the ordered world of the South’s past. Whilst not acknowledging the generic aspects of a short-story cycle in his discussion of discursive contexts, Hannon implicitly supports the notion that Faulkner deliberately chose to create a cycle of short stories in *The Unvanquished* by stating that it may be Faulkner’s greatest achievement to resist that fond remembrance of Southern history as “the brass ring of coherence” and instead present the fuller

⁵² William Faulkner, 219.

⁵³ Singal, *Modernist*, 12

⁵⁴ “Teaching the Short-Story Cycle,” 222.

complexity of “relations.”⁵⁵ Indeed the unresolved tensions between the closures of the stories and the open-endedness of the cycle contribute to that complexity without necessitating the imposition of coherence. Smith sees it as characteristic of the short-story cycle that the ending is just a temporary stopping point and not a conclusion, explaining that it is precisely the lack of finality inherent to the genre that “suggests that restoration is perhaps an impossibility or illusion.”⁵⁶ *The Unvanquished* does not dispel its ambivalent intricacy in its last pages, even though they were written to unify the sequence, but suggests that Bayard’s social environment has witnessed a unique reprieve from violence and guilt that in its uniqueness may well be only temporary, implying also that the unresolved tensions of the past will haunt and determine the future.

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⁵⁵ *Discourses*, 163.

⁵⁶ “Teaching the Short-Story Cycle,” 216.

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